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Women in Poverty: Experience from Limpopo Province, South Africa (pp. 246-258)

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Abstract

This study focuses on the extent of African women poverty level including poverty reduction strategies used in South Africa. The scope of the study was broadened to include poverty –related issues focusing on the current patterns of poverty and inequality affecting African women. African women related poverty problems in the study area, was documented in a comprehensive manner from the point of view of financial, human, institutional, administrative and resource constraints on the part of governmental and non-governmental organizations. The findings suggested that past, current and planned policies could serve as lessons in dealing with exacerbated African women overall poverty in the province.

Key Words: *Children poverty, poverty denial, high incidence of unemployment, vulnerable people, poverty strategy.*

Introduction

This study extends on a poverty survey undertaken in Limpopo Province rural areas during March – July 2006. In Africa and in many other developing countries, the existence of poverty is somehow taken for granted. Politicians and other law makers often think that it is simply the fate of some people to be poor and others rich. This has long been a problem in the country, although sufficient wealth and resources have been used to eradicate poverty, if only they were better redistributed (Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, 1999). The impact of poverty on women and children in developing countries has been serious, and we found this to be also true in

the study area. The problem is not that the Limpopo is unable to meet the basic needs of its people including those of the children, but that proper strategies to fight poverty needs to be implemented and monitored. Poverty grant strategy implemented by government has somehow led to other social problems such as unexpected births by unmarried young women in order to qualify for it. Women related poverty in South Africa can largely be attributed to apartheid regime that encouraged inequality among races. Inequality, poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and the gap between the poor and the rich increased, because black deserved no better life. As a result there was tendency to ignore the rate at which poverty increased amongst blacks' women. Growth and development of the people's social and moral capacities require that their physical needs be met (Marshall, 2000). Generally, the poor are not concerned exclusively with consumption of goods and services from their meager incomes, meeting other goals such as freedom/independence, dignity, self-respect, caring and protection could be just as important as having the money to buy basic goods and services (Woolard, 2002).

Nonetheless, in Limpopo, women poverty is mainly associated with the following:

- households have more children who are hungry and malnourished;
- women heads of household with more children going hungry;
- women households who survive on less than US\$10 per month;
- as a result of poverty children have left/fled homes to live in the streets;
- some children have been abandoned while others live with friends;
- infant mortality rate is higher about 40 per 1,000 live births;
- parents and children are separated because of poverty; and
- the majority of parents are unemployed without any sources of income.

Poverty and unemployment are closely related; the unemployment rate in the province is about 22%. Those employed are working mainly in agriculture, mining and small industries, but the earnings are relatively low to maintain their families. As a result, the rate of participation in formal economy has been quite low (Loy, 1997). A general impression of Limpopo is that it is changing, but at a very slow pace. In particular the government is committed to a programme of empowerment of the previously disadvantaged groups,

especially the African women and disabled peoples (Gyekye & Akinboade, 2001). The average life expectancy in the province is about 54 years, and it has been estimated for the whole country. Just below 50% of the South African population (almost 20 million people) belong in the poorest 40% of households. These are households who consume less than R352.53 per adult equivalent. The ultra – poor comprises 20% of the population (about 10 million people) who consume less than R193.77 per adult equivalent (Kongolo, 2007). All these have had negative influence on the lives of both women and children and inevitably have led them to have a miserable life (Mbendi Business 2003). The province also has a high rate of HIV/AIDS among adults that has negatively affected agricultural production, and as a result increasing further poverty (Free Dictionary, 2004).

Poverty in Limpopo

The Limpopo province is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. Poverty is very high in the rural than urban areas, though urban poverty is also significant. The poorest areas in the province are Bushbuckridge, Southern, Central and Lowveld administrative areas. They are the poorest regions because there are no white household residents. The majority of African households in these areas are headed by old people, mainly women, who are also poor and with a high dependency ratio. Given high illiteracy rate, household remittance receipts are an important source of income for many as there are no employment opportunities (De Villiers, 1995).

Socio-Economic Indicators

The Limpopo province represents about 13% of the total population of South Africa. The province has the highest population growth rate in the country, about 3.9% per annum. The majority of the population is Africans and about 90% of the live in the rural areas. Females account for about 57% of the total population in the province, and about 40% is less than 15 years old. The socio-economic development in the province is very poor compared to any other province. The province contributes only about 4% to South Africa's GDP, and it is at par with the Eastern Cape Province that contributes also about 4% to South Africa's GDP. The province's per capita GDP in 1995 was about R33648, the lowest in South Africa till recently. Informal services are the main economic activities in the province, and to some extent agriculture and mining (DeVilliers, 1995).

Poverty rating by province (table 1) suggests that Limpopo province occupies the ninth position in the country with poverty rating of 77%. The province accounts for about 832 200 households, with a ration of 5.4 people per household, 4.0 people per shack and about 34 700 number of households in shacks, compared to other provinces, except E/Cape province.

The Human Development Index for Limpopo is about 0.47, the lowest in the country compared to the national average of 0.68. Informal and personal activities are the main employment opportunities. Infant mortality rate is about 50 per thousand live births and is higher than the national average rate of 42 per thousand live births. Development indicators such as those related to employment, health, literacy, life expectancy, water and energy consumption fall far short of the overall national average for black households (DBSA, 1994).

The Big Question

A central question addressed in this study is who are the poor women in Limpopo and what should be done to improve their socioeconomic conditions?. The high degree of inadequacies and inequalities observed in Limpopo province requires concerted development efforts to tackle poverty and inequality by involving both the public and private actions (De Villiers, 1995). Depending on poverty measure, African households in the province account for between 20% - 40% of overall poverty and inequality in the province, with the most vulnerable groups of people being women and children (Free Dictionary, 2004). The majority of poor lives in rural areas, accounting for more than 70% than 40% in the urban areas. In fact it can be argued that the numbers of the poor in the province has drastically increased in both rural and urban areas recently.

Effects of Poverty on Women (and Children)

Limpopo's status as one of South Africa's poorest province has several characteristics. Widespread poverty of African women and children is the obvious. HIV/AIDS has had negative impact on agricultural and rural development in the province. Economic downturns put pressure on business and many families, creating massive mass exodus to cities in search of means of survival (Development Network, 2007). As a result many children have left their families in search for better life in the streets as a result of poverty. It is unlikely that the decisions to improve socioeconomic conditions of the African women for the better is likely to result in positive results give their

illiteracy levels. It is indeed assumed that if socioeconomic conditions of African women could be improved for the better, they will likely be in a position to improve their children's conditions by taking good care of them (Free Dictionary, 2004).

Aaronovitch (2007) expresses that a child of an unemployed poor labourer is about sixty times more likely to suffer extreme poverty by the time she/he reaches 30 years than a child of a government official who has everything that he/she needs. This seems amazing until one has to realize that a government official child is only six to ten times less likely to suffer poverty than a labourer's child. If one is doubtful about a claim such like this, one is not all dismissive of such report because the effects of poverty are real, till such time poverty and inequality can be reduced amongst African women in Limpopo. There is also a complete hierarchy of risk attached to this claim, with plumbers' and drivers' children likely to be seriously affected by an extreme poverty. This important illustration shows how it is important to increase the social mobility of the people to create changes in their living conditions. There is a great deal of negative achievements by most African governments, when it comes to improvements of the socioeconomic conditions of the poor people, particularly in improvements the living standards of both women and children.

In Limpopo as well as in other South African provinces poverty is the dominant cause of child labour in agriculture. Children working in agriculture were found to have fewer assets, more hunger, higher parental unemployment rate and lower education status than those not working in agriculture. Other factors influencing child labour in agriculture were a sense of duty to assist family (poor family) and the need to learn skills for their future. In this way parents want to keep children busy given that many parents have problem with alcohol abuse as it has been noted in some parts of the country. Therefore, it can be said that because of poverty many children are pushed to leave schools and work in agriculture and related sectors (Govender, 2007).

Another important effect of poverty on African women's lives is its feminization as a key characteristic in many developing countries including South Africa. Rural women in particular find it very difficult to get a job, to survive and take care of their children. To do this some of these women are forced to sell for sexual favours, which leave them very vulnerable to

sexually transmitted disease, including HIV/AIDS (New Africa 2000). Poverty has obvious negative effects on the development of children (Crothers, 1997), and as a result it has been the major focus of this study.

Child Support Grant as a Poverty Strategy

The government Child Support Grant that replaced the Maintenance Grant is seen to be a poverty strategy that has many advantages. First, it is a general means of support for poor families with children. This strategy acknowledges the state's responsibility towards poverty, not only to the old, the disabled and people with special problems, but also to the able-bodied with child rearing responsibilities (Robinson & Biersterker, 1997). The benefits of this strategy are also said to have a significant impact on the income of the poor, particularly in the rural areas. It also goes some distance to establishing a basic social safety net or basic income guarantee for the poor (Haarman, 1998). The implementation of the Child Support Grant strategy represents a dramatic and important innovation in South African social security, particularly if the system is extended to older children when fiscal constraints allow (Robinson and Biersterker, 1997).

The Child Support Grant helps to address some of the key problems in the maintenance grant system which only targeted certain household structures (the disintegrated nuclear family). It overlooked alternative care-giving structures, such as grandparents caring for children and poor "intact nuclear families". South Africa's social assistance programme is helping to reduce poverty, contributing to social cohesion and having a positive impact on the economic opportunities of households, this includes the Child Support Grant. Its greatest poverty reducing potential lies with the progressive extension of the Child Support Grant to 14 years of age, which would yield up to 57% poverty gap. Although Child Support Grant is not enough to alleviate poverty without income from employment, however, it contributes to an increase in the number of children enrolling in schools, while providing the household that receives it with a possibility of finding employment (City Vision, 2005). An effective poverty eradication strategy should include different income approaches, to help reduce poverty effects on the population. Such a strategy should come from within and it should be aimed at building capacity for self-reliance (Yifala, 1997).

Measuring Poverty

Poverty in this study was measured on the basis that it is either subjective, that is, based on the respondents' (women) perceptions or objective (relating to some externally-set standards). The first step in measuring poverty was to establish the poverty line. To a large extent, poverty lines are often arbitrarily established. However, it is less important which particular line should be selected and more important to reach a national consensus on the baseline poverty line is concerned (RDP Repot 1994). Development network (2007) describe poverty line using an average adjusted household expenditure measure, that is compared with a minimum income level or poverty line for poor households, by considering R267.21 per adult equivalent per month. They then concluded that almost 36.6% of all households and 49% of the South Africa population is likely to be poor. In the present study, two main approaches were followed: the first step was to define an absolute poverty line, also known as an established level of consumption below which households are considered to have less than a minimum standard of consumption.

This level was known to be consistent with a minimum level of food intake by households in terms of caloric consumption. The second was to define a relative poverty line in which households were ranked from poorest to richest and a more or less arbitrary cut-off point was selected to label those below the line as poor (INS, 1998; Development Network, 2007). Most studies using the first approach have often converged on an income level cut-off point of 36% to 40% of the population: that is, about 40% of African women (and children) on average in the households were classified as poor.

Respondents (women) were ranked according to both monetary and non-monetary incomes and controlled for the effect of household size using adult equivalence scales. We then described those women under the 40% mark as poor and those under 20% as ultra poor (RDP Report 1994). Given that the life of many South Africans differ from the point of view of social strata, it was therefore difficult to draw up a poverty line across all these social stratas (Kongolo, 2007). A more subjective measure grounded in the experience of respondents (women) provided an understanding of the approach and showed that the subjective experience of poverty varied across social groupings (Sigcau,1999), unfortunately this was found to be the same in all social groupings investigated in the province.

The Survey and Data

The data for this study was collected between January 2007 and April 2007. The researcher was assisted by two Honours economics students from the University of Limpopo. A survey covering some 630 African women households was conducted randomly using a simple questionnaire. Various types of questions were asked to heads of the households (mostly women), including a question on whether during the past years till the day of the survey if they had enough/not enough income to feed and support their children. This was considered as the most definite poverty indicator.

Data on living expenses and income was very difficult to collect in Limpopo because most African women households are not totally monetized. Household expenditure data is often used in many studies because it is more reliable than income data. The latter is often biased due to the reticence of respondents to divulge such important information and also because expenditure is a better measure of long -term living standards of the people, since it is not subject to transitory variations (RDP Report, 1994; INS,1998). Given the multitude social, economic and political problems facing the province, it was believed that the data from the survey conducted in Limpopo, explained well the level of poverty of African women in the province, and therefore, it would be of interest to both government and policy makers. This data provides some indications of the extent of poverty in the province. If possible the provincial government should focus its attention on those strategies which reduce the effects of poverty and inequality, to assist improves the living standards of both women and children.

Results

The number of respondents (women households) interviewed in all localities of the Limpopo province as part of this study was quite significant. On average about 79 participants (households) were interviewed per each locality in Limpopo, giving a total number of 630 households. The way in which interviews were conducted with easiness can be attributed to the following main reason: the majority of African women in the province are unemployed and are not working. They often stay at home looking after children and trying to organise something to prepare for their families. In this way they were easily identified and contacted by the research team and were asked to answer to the study's questions. This also assisted the research team to contact few children through their mothers' assistance and asked them also some questions. The findings of this study suggest that more than 45% of

African women in various households in Limpopo are poor. In other words it can be expressed that, about 45% of African women and 55% of children in the African households live in absolute poverty. This percentage is somewhat higher than the World Bank estimates in 2005 which indicated that 32% of South Africa's population lives below the poverty line. In many parts of developing world, households with a lower number of children have a lower poverty rate (about 30%) than households with more children (about 65,7%) respectively. However, in Limpopo, this seems to be an extreme case, the degree of poverty in both households with less and more children is on the increase. Both households experience the same amount of poverty pressure because of the non existence of job opportunities.

Conclusion

This study presents an extent of the degree of African women related poverty in Limpopo province of South Africa. It provides some important characteristics of poverty related issues, namely, the extent of poverty by household size, poverty by settlement size and poverty by locality. The study also suggests that the province has a high degree of incidence of unemployment among African women, and a very high incidence of poverty in both rural and urban settlements. The findings of the study further confirm the existence of high rate of poverty amongst all social groupings in the province. Although both African men and women endured poverty as a result of apartheid racial policy, almost fourteen years since apartheid regime was defeated, poverty continues to destroy human lives almost every day. The effects of poverty on human being cannot be overlooked and undermined. To do this is to deny its existence while it continues to create more economic and social problems. From the point of view of the findings of this study, it can be said that poverty in the province is on the increase given the number of African women affected. Based on these findings, the study recommends an effective poverty eradication strategy that combines different income approaches, to help reduce poverty effects on the population. Such a strategy should come from within and it should be aimed at building capacity for self-reliance.

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Table 1: Poverty Rating by Province, South Africa 2001

| Province | Persons per Household | No of Households | Average No of people per shacks | No of Hous-eholds in shacks | Poverty Rating (%) |
|------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| W/Cape | 3.9 | 152 100 | 4.1 | 94 000 | 23 |
| N/Cape | 3.5 | 26,800 | - | - | 57 |
| E/Cape | 5.3 | 1 018 300 | 4.0 | 68 300 | 78 |
| KZN | 6.2 | 1 049 000 | 5.2 | 82 000 | 66 |
| Free State | 4.0 | 561 800 | 4.4 | 152 000 | 53 |
| Mpumalanga | 4.7 | 654 700 | 3.9 | 64 600 | 52 |
| Limpopo | 5.4 | 834 200 | 4.0 | 34 700 | 77 |
| N/West | 3.9 | 7345 100 | 4.4 | 69 200 | 57 |
| Gauteng | 3.9 | 735 100 | 4.3 | 69 200 | 19 |
| All | 4.3 | 6 092 700 | 3.9 | 902 900 | - |

Source: Gyekye & Akinboade, 2001

Table 2 Presents Women In Poverty: Poverty By Household Size, Poverty By Settlement Size, And Poverty By Locality.

A. Estimated Poverty by Household Size

| Number of people in households | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 14+ |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Estimated poverty rate by household (%) | 30.0 | 34.4 | 37.4 | 43.3 | 48.6 | 53.5 | 56.4 | 58.2 | 63.4 | 65.7 | 67.8 |

B. Estimated Poverty by Settlement Size

| Area | Metro | Urban | Semi-urban | Rural |
|---------------------|-------|-------|------------|-------|
| % of Poor Household | 36.3 | 38.1 | 45.7 | 64.2 |
| % of Poor Women | 32.2 | 40.3 | 43.2 | 60.4 |

C. Estimated Poverty by Locality

| Name of Locality | Tzane En | Kapane | Bolobe Du | Linyenye | Nkowa Nkowa A | Nkowa Nkowa B | Tikline | Mwamitwa |
|------------------------|----------|--------|-----------|----------|---------------|---------------|---------|----------|
| % Reporting Poor Women | 54.7 | 63.8 | 64.3 | 65.8 | 65.6 | 60.4 | 67.6 | 68.3 |

Source: Research Data, 2007.